

Service to Hold Public Hearing and Re-open Comment Period on the Revised Proposed Critical Habitat Designation and Associated Draft Economic Analysis for the Mississippi Gopher Frog

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announces a public hearing and the re-opening of the comment period on the revised proposed critical habitat designation and associated draft economic analysis for the endangered Mississippi gopher frog, as well as a change to the methodology used to delineate critical habitat for this species.

The public hearing will be held at the Gulfport High School auditorium, 100 Perry Street, Gulfport, Mississippi 39507 on January 31, 2012, from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Immediately preceding the hearing will be an informal informational meeting from 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. Biologists will be available during the informational meeting to discuss the revised proposal and answer questions. The Service is committed to providing access to this meeting for all participants. Persons needing reasonable accommodations in order to attend and participate in this meeting should contact Stephen Ricks at 601-321-1122 or stephen_ricks@fws.gov as soon as possible. In order to allow sufficient time to process requests, please call or e-mail no later than close of business on January 24, 2012.

With the re-opening of the comment period on the revised proposed critical habitat designation, the Service is seeking comments, suggestions, and any additional information on biology, taxonomy, threats, range, distribution, population size, or current or planned activities and their possible impacts on the Mississippi gopher frog or its proposed critical habitat, as well as, comments on our draft economic analysis and the revised methodology for designating critical habitat.

During the re-opened comment period, which will be published in the Federal Register on Tuesday, January 17, 2012, the public can submit their comments on the revised proposal and draft economic analysis on or before March 2, 2012, by 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time. All comments will be posted on <http://www.regulations.gov> including any personal information provided. Comments previously submitted during the first comment period do not need to be resubmitted. A final decision on the designation of critical habitat for the Mississippi gopher frog will consider all comments and information received by the close of the comment period.

In addition to accepting comments during the public hearing on January 31, the only other ways comments will be accepted include: (1) Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov> In the box that reads "Enter Keyword or ID," enter the Docket number for this proposed rule, which is FWS-R4-ES-2010-0024. Then, in the Search panel on the left side of the screen, under the Document Type heading, check the box next to Proposed Rules. You may enter a comment by clicking on "Submit a

Comment.” Please ensure that you have found the correct rulemaking before submitting your comment; or,

(2) U.S. mail or hand delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attn: Docket No. FWS-R4-ES-2010-0024; Division of Policy and Directives management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, PDM-2042; Arlington, VA 22203.

The revised proposal to designate critical habitat for the endangered Mississippi gopher frog (published on September 27, 2011) recommended a total of 7,015 acres as critical habitat within two states, including Louisiana’s St. Tammany Parish and Mississippi’s Forrest, Harrison, Jackson, and Perry counties. The revised methodology for designating critical habitat (presented in the current notice) will reduce the total number of acres to 6,538. The proposed change in the methodology is based on our additional review of movement data for gopher frogs as a result of peer reviewer comments. Occupied habitat and currently unoccupied habitat have been determined to be essential for the conservation of the Mississippi gopher frog and, as such, both are being proposed as critical habitat.

Identifying the habitat essential to the Mississippi gopher frog is an important milestone along the road to recovery. The identification process was greatly benefited by the Service's existing partnerships with the U.S. Forest Service; Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks; and private landowners, who are currently working to conserve this unique species and its habitat. The Service looks forward to continuing and strengthening these partnerships and associated habitat conservation efforts.

A draft economic analysis of the revised proposed critical habitat estimates that incremental impacts from the designation would range from \$102,000 to \$37.7 million. Almost all of the estimated economic impacts center on the recently proposed acres in Louisiana. The broad range in estimated economic impacts stems from uncertainty about whether any new federally sponsored projects will be pursued in Louisiana and the conservation measures the Service may recommend if consultation does occur.

The Mississippi gopher frog is a darkly colored, moderately sized frog with warts covering its back and dusky spots on its belly. It lives underground in pine forests that were historically dominated by longleaf pine and breeds in small temporary ponds.

The complete revised proposal appeared in the Federal Register on September 27, 2011, and can be obtained by visiting the Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov> at Docket Number FWS-R4-ES-2010-0024. A copy also can be obtained by contacting U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 6578 Dogwood View Parkway, Suite A, Jackson, Mississippi 39213; phone 601-321-1121.

The Service prepared the proposed rule per a court-approved settlement agreement resulting from a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and Friends of Mississippi Public Lands. As part of a revision to this settlement agreement, the Service has committed to deliver the final critical habitat rule to the Federal Register by May 30, 2012.

Critical habitat is a term defined in the Endangered Species Act. It refers to specific geographic areas that are essential to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require

special management considerations or protection. The designation of critical habitat will help ensure federal agencies and the public are aware of the Mississippi gopher frog's habitat needs and proper consultation is conducted by federal agencies when required by law.

A critical habitat designation does not set up a preserve or refuge and only applies to situations where federal funding or a federal permit is involved. It does not allow government or public access to private land. Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat.

Since the Mississippi gopher frog is listed under the Endangered Species Act, it is already protected wherever it occurs. Federal agencies are required to consult on any action taken that might affect the species, whether critical habitat is designated.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov or <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/>. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfwssoutheast, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwssoutheast, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwssoutheast>.